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ABSTRACT

School choice plans have been widely adopted, and most urban areas have a limited choice plan of some sort. This digest presents an overview of different choice strategies by reviewing the experiences of several urban areas. Minnesota has statewide open enrollment for all students, making all public schools throughout the state open to all students, provided that the receiving school has room and the transfer does not harm racial integration efforts. In 1995, 15% of the state's students participated in various school choice programs. There is mixed evidence about the impact of this program, but it appears that there is little validity to the theory that choice prompts schools and districts to reform programs to meet the demands of families. New York City has instituted a policy of citywide choice. Parents may transfer their children to any city public school if space is available, but the program has received little publicity, and is not widely known. Some districts have published their choice plans, and others rely on magnet schools to promote school choice. In Massachusetts, choice has primarily been a means to achieve racial and ethnic balance in the schools. Acknowledging the negative effects of a choice system based only on magnet schools, the state has expanded its early efforts to include other choice options. The controlled choice option in Boston (Massachusetts) divides the city into three geographic areas for elementary and middle school assignment, but high school choice is citywide. Critics feel that there are so many controls for race, ethnicity, and gender that real school choice by parents is compromised. In Milwaukee (Wisconsin), a voucher system has provided educational alternatives to many low-income students. Pilot voucher programs in other cities are being implemented, and early reports indicate that they can increase educational effectiveness and opportunity, as do other school choice plans. (Contains 17 references.) (SLD)

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RECENT EXPERIENCE WITH URBAN SCHOOL CHOICE PLANS

It is generally agreed that urban public schools and school systems need to radically change how they are governed. Proponents of school choice believe that empowering families with educational options will promote such a change, because it presupposes that schools will reform to increase their attractiveness. In fact, choice has been widely adopted; hardly a state in the United States does not have some type of choice plan, and hardly a major urban area does not have a limited choice plan. This digest presents an overview of different choice strategies by reviewing the experiences in several urban areas.

Statewide Choice: Minnesota

Plan Description

In 1988 Minnesota became the first state to enact statewide open enrollment for all students, making all public schools throughout the state open to any K-12th grade student, provided that the receiving school has room and the transfer does not harm racial integration efforts.

Students also have numerous other options. High school juniors and seniors can take courses at public or private higher education institutions for both high school and future higher education credit. The High School Graduation Incentive Program allows dropouts and students at risk of not graduating to attend public or private nonsectarian schools with special supportive programs. In addition, families are allowed to claim a tax deduction up to $1,000 for school expenses, including private school tuition. Other initiatives include the Diploma Opportunities for Adults, designed for students age 21 and over; education programs for pregnant and parenting minors; and Area Learning Centers, which offer personalized education programs for students age 12 to adult.

The Charter Schools Act permits teachers to create and operate new public schools on contract to the local school board. Charter schools, accountable to public authority and parents, offer innovative or alternative educational opportunities for students. Thirty-five charters are allowed in the state (Shokraii & Hanks, 1996).

Outcomes

Enrollment. In 1995, 15 percent of the state's 750,000 public school students participated in various school choice programs. Use of within-district choice was greater in urban areas; use of open enrollment was more likely in smaller districts and rural areas. Use by minority students is on the rise, with minority and low-income students well represented in "second chance" programs (Colopy & Tarr, 1994; Nathan, 1994).

Parent Information/Satisfaction. Parent information remains a key in determining the use of any choice alternative. However, the sole statutory responsibility for school choice information dissemination to parents resides with the local school districts, even though they might face a conflict of interest because of the threatened loss of students, and, therefore, funds. Other information sources exist, such as hot lines, but seem inadequate since a 1990 survey found that parents were aware of open enrollment but not of additional choice initiatives.

Parent satisfaction with charter schools is very high. Most liked their special curriculum features, small size, and environment. Major causes of dissatisfaction were a lack of school resources, transportation, inadequate space, school administration, and turmoil during the first year (Shokraii & Hanks, 1996).

Impact on School Districts. There is mixed evidence on the impact of open enrollment on program improvement in school districts, but it appears that there was little validity to the theory that choice prompts schools and districts to reform programming to meet the demands of families. Only some districts that lost a high number of students experienced teacher layoffs; cancellation of academic courses, extracurricular activities; and student support services; and school closings (Funkhouser & Colopy, 1994).

Equity. Minority youth comprise about 40 percent of charter school enrollments (Nathan, 1996). Open enrollment has stimulated a noticeable increase in the ethnic diversity of Minnesota public schools, and has fostered a more equitable distribution of educational resources at the local school level (Tenbusch, 1993).

Student Achievement. There is no conclusive data on the effects of open enrollment on academic achievement. However, students feel that their self-esteem, attitude, and attendance are greatly improved at their school of choice (Rubenstein, 1992). Certain charter schools are indicative of the improvements that open enrollment has promoted in Minnesota. The City Academy in St. Paul, for example, with a program for alienated young adults wishing to return to school, has graduated 54 percent of its students in three years (Shokraii & Hanks, 1996).

Citywide Choice: New York City

Plan Description

New York City, the largest public school system in the country, consists of 32 community school districts serving nearly 1.5 million highly diverse students. In 1992 then New York City Schools Chancellor Joseph Fernandez initiated a citywide choice plan.

Parents have the right to transfer their children to any New York City public school, provided space is available. Parents who want to take advantage of the interdistrict choice plan need to contact the Board of Education to obtain a copy of the Chancellor's Choice Regulation, and

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become familiar with the chosen school's procedures and requirements. They must then write a letter to the superintendent of that school's district to request a transfer. The time period for the superintendent's response is not specified. If a request is rejected, the parent has the right to appeal to the Chancellor. There is no guarantee that siblings will be transferred to the same school and, most importantly, transportation is not provided.

Fernandez' successors have been faced with difficulties more urgent than choice. Thus, there has been almost no publicity by the Board of Education or in the districts. In fact, the only detailed information on choice available to the public is contained in a special *New York Newsday* "pullout" section published in 1993 (Cookson & Lucks, 1995).

Community School District 4

Strategy. A well-known choice district is District 4, which lies in East Harlem, one of New York City's poorest neighborhoods, and which ranked last among school districts before choice was implemented. Beginning in 1976, teachers were given the autonomy to redesign and create new schools. The district now operates approximately 44 schools. The choice process starts in the fifth or sixth grade, when students move from elementary schools to one of the district's alternative schools. Parents receive an information booklet with descriptions of each program, and are invited to orientation sessions to obtain more information. Students are required to submit an application listing up to six selections.

Admissions. Admissions decisions are primarily made by the schools themselves, which have a high degree of control over their programs and admissions policies. There is one stipulation to the admissions criteria: schools may accept no more than 20 percent of their entering class from outside District 4's boundaries.The application consists of standardized test scores, teacher ratings of work habits, attendance records, and academic abilities; personal interviews are also conducted (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1992). In 1992, 60 percent of the applicants were enrolled in their first choice school.

Student Achievement. Before the creation of alternative schools, District 4 had the lowest reading scores of the 32 City districts. By 1988, 62.5 percent of the students were reading at or above grade level, raising the district ranking to 19. Student achievement in later years dropped off, however, and there were sharp disparities in achievement among various choice programs. Nevertheless, it is clear that District 4 has had a positive impact on student achievement in East Harlem (Carnegie Foundation, 1992). One indication is that placement of District 4's graduates into selective high schools met or exceeded the citywide rate for each of the most selective high schools in the City (Fliegel, 1993).

Magnet Schools

Strategy. There are currently more than 300 magnet high schools: academic and vocational magnets, and academic career magnets that combine academic and career curricula. Other schools center on special education or bilingual programs. Some have programs that focus on science and engineering, medicine, the performing arts, humanities, law, business, fashion, or other themes. Theme schools enhance student motivation and create identities that bring the student body, faculty, and administration together. Magnets foster an increase in parent involvement and faculty morale.

Admissions procedures vary with the school; some admit students by special audition or test, others by review of academic records and student interest. Academic career magnets admit students half by school review and half by random assignment through lottery.

Equity. Magnet schools have the ability to provide educational benefits and reduce racial and ethnic segregation, depending upon the selection process employed. A critical variable in determining who applies to which schools is access to information through parent information centers; the more that parents are aware of their options, the harder they will pursue their option of choice.

The schools have sparked considerable controversy over their role in student "creaming." That is, the higher achieving students, with the most involved parents and the most resources, gain more information and have greater access to better quality magnet schools. Also, academic magnets select all their students, and academic career magnets select half of them; therefore, it is inevitable that weaker students will be placed in underfunded, underresourced schools, and may suffer from having contact only with other low-achieving students.

The career magnets work to reduce racial and ethnic segregation through the lottery system. They have produced a system that is fairly equitable for three reasons: (1) the number of magnet schools is large, providing seats for many students; (2) the application system is relatively simple, even for disadvantaged students; and (3) the requirement that schools accept students on a random basis decreases the effects of creaming.

Enrollment and Achievement. Most of the interest is in academic magnets, indicating that students are interested in quality education, possibly with plans to pursue higher education. This also suggests that students are choosing schools to get away from comprehensive neighborhood schools. Magnet schools provide seats for over 60 percent of the City's high school students (Tokarska, 1992). Generally, student achievement depends on the school ethos, its organization, inspiring teachers and leaders, and the program plan. Since many magnets are still in the experimental phase, they do not offer conclusive evidence about the positive effects on academic achievement, although many have lowered dropout rates and raised reading scores.

Desegregation Plan: Massachusetts

Plan Description

In Massachusetts choice has primarily been a means to achieve racial and ethnic balance in schools. Experiments with choice grew out of efforts to attract whites into inner-city schools. In the mid-1970s, Massachusetts created magnet schools to promote desegregation, and though they did expand the school options, they left schools more racially imbalanced than before. The limited capacity created a number of disappointed applicants and drained much of the motivated staff, parents, resources, and funding away from neighborhood schools (Glenn, 1991). The selection process of magnets, primarily benefitting the more academically prepared, excluded a sizable minority population.

Acknowledging the negative effects of a choice system based solely on magnet schools, the state encouraged

cities to experiment with other forms of choice. Some implemented controlled choice, which does not rely upon the market rationale of educational reform but offers a means to achieve racial and ethnic balance in schools. Automatic assignment based on a child's address was replaced by a system whereby the family selects a school after receiving information about options and counseling. Assignment is made based on family preferences, available capacities, and integration efforts. Controlled choice, intended to increase the participation of low-income and minority children while stimulating every school to be productive, has four objectives: (1) to offer all students in a community equal access to all public schools, regardless of geographical location; (2) to involve all parents in an informed decision-making process; (3) to create pressure for all schools to improve, and eliminate enrollment based on residence; and (4) where necessary, to achieve racial desegregation of every school with a minimal amount of mandatory assignment. More than 25 percent of the state's public school students attend schools in communities that are actively encouraging choice (Glenn, 1991).

Cambridge

Strategy. Cambridge, one of the smallest urban districts in Massachusetts, has one of the most successful controlled choice programs in the nation. Its student population is about 50 percent white, 33 percent African American, 14 percent Hispanic, and 7 percent Asian (Thernstrom, 1991). Implemented in 1981, the plan resulted from grassroots efforts like community meetings, school mergers, and redrawn neighborhood lines. Students, who are provided with transportation, can choose any school in the system as long as the enrollment in every school, every grade, and every program, reflects a white-to-minority ratio that is within five percentage points at the proportional racial composition of Cambridge (Thernstrom, 1991).

The crux of the program is the Parent Information Center, which offers information in six different languages. The Center provides information about each school in the community, gets parents involved in school improvement, reaches out to language minority and poor families who may be neglected by the traditional system, and serves as a community center (Cookson, 1994). Cambridge has invested $65,000 in the Center (Carnegie Foundation, 1992).

Outcomes. Over 90 percent of all students have gained admission to a school of their choice (Cookson, 1994). In several grades, students outperform students nationally in reading, math, social studies, and science (Carnegie Foundation, 1992). Minority students have outperformed white students in math and reading citywide, and attendance rates have risen nine percent (Cookson, 1994). All of Cambridge's magnet schools have achieved racial balance, but poor, immigrant, non-English-speaking students remain relatively isolated in one or two schools. Though there still exist inequities in resources and staffing, which are counter to the goal of equity in controlled choice, there is an elaborate budgeting process to assure appropriate funding for each school.

Boston

Strategy. Controlled choice in Boston was implemented in 1989 on a pilot basis. Previously, the district had established a few magnet schools, such as Boston Latin, which required entrance examinations for admission. The magnets exacerbated the racial separation between schools because the more competitive schools were predominantly white. Forced busing spurred white flight out of the inner-city and out of the city school system, changing the social class composition of the city.

Controlled choice divides the city into three geographical zones for the purposes of assignment of elementary and middle schools; high school choice is citywide. Families can choose an elementary or middle school in the zone where they live. Students are assigned random numbers and applicants are admitted in order of their number, although all assignments are made to ensure a racial balance in each school. Students whose choices are all filled are encouraged to make new selections based on what is available, with the aim of encouraging families to investigate unknown options and possibly discover some surprises. The goal for school improvement is not to eliminate the magnet schools, but, rather, to make all schoolsand programs roughly equal in terms of educational quality.

Outcomes. A majority of the students are accepted into their first choice schools (Glenn, 1991). Controlled choice has placed more emphasis on abolishing the traditional system of involuntarily placing poorer and minority students in least popular schools and it has tried to create pressure on the educational system to improve or close failing schools.

Critiques of the Plan

Some critics of controlled choice say that counselors often do not know which schools are filled, and therefore waste many parents' efforts to secure admission (Glenn, 1991). Thernstrom (1991), blaming limited space in schools of choice and the slow pace to improve all schools, asserts that desegregation causes many involuntary assignments, and that pressure is placed on parents to choose unpopular schools. Critics also feel that controls for race, ethnicity, and gender compromise choice, and do not give parents the right to really choose their children's schools. Conversely, controlled choice indirectly promotes educational improvements by putting pressure on poorer performing schools, which must either become acceptable or be shut down (Glenn, 1991).

Voucher Plans

Plan Description

School vouchers, one of the most controversial forms of school choice, are cash certificates from public funds that enable students to attend any school of their choice, public or private. According to most teachers' unions and other public service organizations, vouchers would destroy the public school system because they remove funds from public schools and allow the best students to opt out of the public school system. Conversely, free-market conservatives support vouchers because they believe in the marketplace as a mechanism for reform and are committed to public policies that lessen the authority of the state. A key issue is church and state relations; most voucher plans could result in the expenditure of state money in private religious schools (Cookson, 1994).

Milwaukee Plan

Description. Milwaukee, Wisconsin, implemented the nation's first pilot voucher choice plan in September 1990. The Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP), a limited intersectional voucher plan for the Milwaukee School

District, entitles selected students to receive public monies to attend any nonsectarian private school of their choice. The program is specifically designed to allow low-income families access to private or alternative educational opportunities (Witte, 1994).

The cash value of the voucher is usually equivalent to the state per pupil expenditure on public schooling: roughly $4,400 per student in 1996-97 (Walsh, 1997). Eligible families have incomes not exceeding 1.75 times the national poverty rate, with children not previously enrolled in a private school. Legislation expanded the choice program to allow participation of up to 15,000 Milwaukee K-12 students in 1996-97, but a court challenge resulted in a decision overturning the expansion. The judge ruled it unconstitutional by the use of state funds to support religious institutions, and also reduced the size of the program, citing that the expansion would no longer make the program "experimental" (Walsh, 1997).

Outcomes. The MPCP has provided alternative educational opportunities for many low-income students while not creaming the best students from the MPS system (Witte, 1994). Student attrition has declined, although it remains a problem for both choice and MPS schools. Students who leave the choice program are more likely to have lower test scores, live farther away than continuing students, and express a lower degree of satisfaction (Witte, 1994).

Researchers studying outcomes in achievement since vouchers became available found that reading scores of low-income minority students were on average 3 to 6 percentage points higher, and math scores were 5 to 11 points higher than those of comparable public school students (cited in Lee & Foster, 1997).

Attitudes of choice parents regarding educational quality and instruction, and school administration, were much more positive than their evaluations of their children's previous public schools. Also, parent involvement in school activities was greater in choice schools than in most other Milwaukee public schools (Witte, 1994).

Other Voucher Plans

California currently has a mandatory intradistrict choice plan and a voluntary interdistrict plan, but voters rejected a proposed voucher plan in the November 1993 election. Last year, Governor Pete Wilson proposed a limited voucher plan calling for the state to pay a large portion of the educational costs of students from the worst California public schools to attend public, private, or religious schools of their choice. In November 1992, voters in ***Colorado*** rejected a full school choice ballot initiative that would have provided vouchers worth 50 percent of the existing per pupil expenditure to send children to a public, private, or religious school of their parents' choice. In 1995, ***Cleveland, Ohio***, became the only city in the country to institute a state voucher pilot program that includes all schools, public, private, and religious. Low-income students receive twice the percentage of tuition costs than other students do. Initially, the plan was limited to students from grades K-3; one grade level is to be added each succeeding year, up to grade 8.

Conclusion

Choice has proven to be a useful tactic in promoting urban public education transformation and experimentation, and its focus on the involvement of families in all phases of schooling is important. Choice is not the only genuine engine of educational reform, however, although the reports here suggest that it can increase educational effectiveness and opportunity. Ultimately, good schools for all children will only be achieved through finance equity, prepared professionals, high standards, and purpose.

—Peter W. Cookson, Jr., and Sonali M. Shroff

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